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Suffering, Ethics, and the Body of Christ: Anointing as a Strategic Alternative Practice

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Abstract

Within the moral/social order maintained and reproduced by biomedical ethics (i.e., the “peaceable community”), suffering is a senseless accident with no value. Insofar as suffering compromises the fundamental pillar of this order, namely, autonomy, it threatens the existence of the “peaceable community”. Consequently, biomedical ethics is only able to offer those who suffer one moral or practical response: that of elimination, embodied most vividly in the increasingly approved practice of assisted-suicide. Another moral/ social order, however, the “peaceable Kingdom” or the “Body of Christ”, provides an alternative understanding of the meaning, purpose, and significance of suffering, through the Roman Catholic sacrament of anointing of the sick. Recognizing the power of sickness and suffering to “dis-inscribe” bodies of their normative self-understandings, the Church responds with a set of liturgical practices which intend to respond to the dynamics of suffering, re-inscribe these bodies, and assist persons in fulfilling the vocation of “participating in Christ's suffering for the salvation of the world”.

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